SOL, PLAATJIE

(Between the Wire and the Wall
Lewis

PREFACE

This book tells the story of the life of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje. Plaatje was an African of Barolong ancestry, who was born in the Orange Free State in 1876, and died in Johannesburg in 1932. One of the most talented South Africans of his generation, Plaatje was in the forefront of the public affairs of the African people for the greater part of his adult life, one of their best-known political leaders and spokesmen, and a prolific writer and journalist. He led a life of almost ceaseless endeavour and commitment, sustained by a vision of a South Africa free from all forms of discrimination on grounds of race or colour. A pioneer in the little-known history of the African press, Plaatje was one of the founders of the South African Native National Congress (later the African National Congress) in 1912, became its first General Secretary, and twice travelled overseas to represent the interests of his people. He wrote a political book, *Native Life in South Africa*, which stands to this day as one of the most powerful polemics – and there have been many – to have been written on South Africa; he was well known as a political journalist, both as editor of his own newspaper and later in life as a contributor to many others. And he made an outstanding contribution in the field of literature – both in his native tongue, Setswana, and in writing a historical novel, *Mhudi*, the first novel in English to have been written by a black South African, and one of the earliest African novels from any part of the continent.

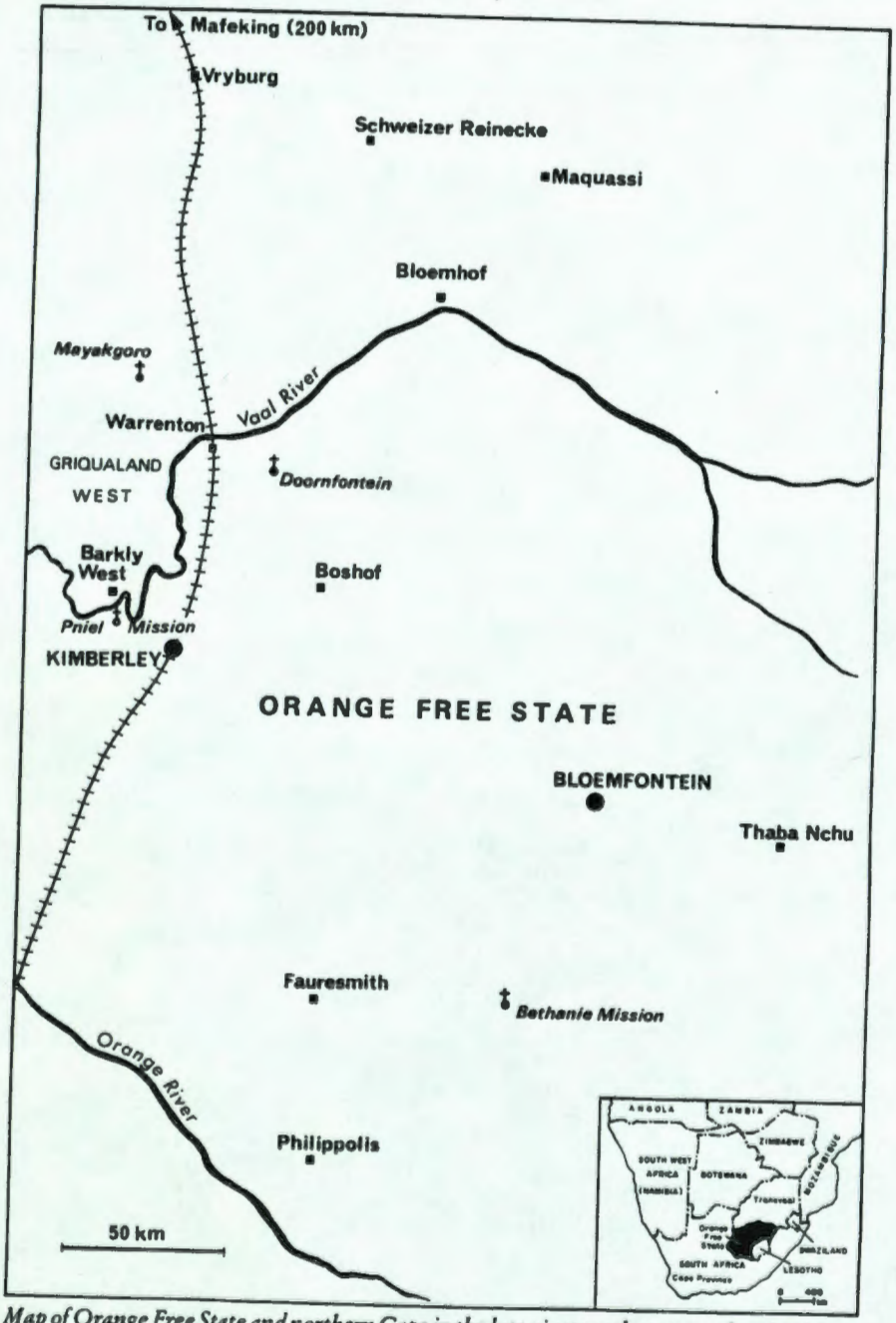
Simply to outline some of Plaatje's accomplishments in this way is to suggest an immense versatility and range of achievement. No wonder then that the journalist Vere Stent, a lifelong friend of Plaatje's since they first met during the siege of Mafeking, should have called him 'one of the greatest of the sons of South Africa'; or that another journalist, G. A. Simpson, editor of the *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, the daily paper from Plaatje's home town of Kimberley, should have acknowledged, when unveiling a memorial tombstone to him in 1935, three years after Plaatje's death, that 'no mere words of mine can adequately pay tribute to his memory – the memory of one who was an outstanding figure in the life of the people of South Africa'.

Fifty years on it is remarkable how little is generally known of Plaatje's life and career. The vast majority of South Africans, it would be true to say, have never even heard of his name. Such a state of affairs stems not so much from the lack of

recognition accorded to Plaatje during his own lifetime – the comments of Vere Stent and G. A. Simpson suggest otherwise – but rather from South Africa's capacity to obscure and distort its own past, to neglect the lives of those whose ideals and aspirations have been in conflict with official orthodoxies, past and present. The South African historical memory, to put it another way, has been highly selective in its recall.

I hope this book may contribute to challenging the dominance of this form of historical memory; and in showing that it is possible to write a book such as this, I hope I may encourage others to undertake biographical research into the lives of other men and women of Plaatje's background and generation. The longer this is left, it need scarcely be added, the less there will be to recover.

Writing this book has presented a variety of difficulties and challenges. Foremost amongst them has been Plaatje's own extraordinary range of talents, particularly in the field of languages – he spoke eight different languages, European and African, and wrote regularly in half of these. I make no claims to such linguistic competence myself. Where appropriate, I have relied upon others for assistance in translation, and have taken comfort in the knowledge that were Plaatje to await a biographer with a range of linguistic skills which matched his own, it is doubtful if an account of his life would ever be written. I hope that others more qualified than myself to assess Plaatje's contribution in the field of Tswana literature, in particular, will be encouraged by my findings to investigate this subject further.



Map of Orange Free State and northern Cape in the late nineteenth century, showing its location in present-day southern Africa.

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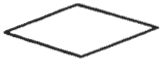

Early years

In the 1870s South Africa was more of a geographical expression than a political entity. It consisted of a sparsely inhabited but remarkably diverse collection of societies, both African and European in origin, linked in a pattern of relationships that ranged from extremes of peaceful interdependence to outright warfare. As yet there was no unified political authority across the whole of the subcontinent. The largest state was the Cape Colony, the oldest area of European settlement, now a self-governing colony of the British empire and equipped with the ordered parliamentary, legal and administrative institutions of the mother country. Outside the colony's few towns most of its inhabitants, black and white, made a living from the land: hunting, herding or cultivating crops.

In the extreme north-west, however, in an area that fell just beyond the northern borders of the Cape Colony, there was a new focus of economic activity: diamonds. Here, the new town of Kimberley had sprung into existence, and thousands of people – of all races and backgrounds, and from both within and beyond the borders of the colony – were drawn in to the area. The novelist Anthony Trollope, who visited Kimberley in 1877, thought it 'perhaps the most unlovely city that I knew', but the wealth it produced had nevertheless given South Africa a new economic importance in the eyes of the outside world.[1] The British imperial government, whose primary concern hitherto had been to administer the Cape Colony as cheaply as possible, now took a new interest in the region; despite the claims of the Boer states of the Transvaal and Orange Free State, Griqualand West (as this region was known) had accordingly been annexed to the British empire.

Neither the Orange Free State nor the Transvaal had the strength to dispute the British annexation of the diamond fields. Both were poor, underpopulated agricultural republics. Gold had yet to be discovered on the Witwatersrand, and the Transvaal in particular had the greatest difficulty in supporting its own bureaucracy and financing the 'native wars' against neighbouring African states in which it was often involved. The two Boer states were the lineal descendants of groups of farmers who had left the Cape Colony in the 1830s to escape the authority of the British in a mass migration known as the Great Trek. Over the next thirty years the British authorities had been, for the most part, prepared to condone their aspirations to independence and to allow the two republics a

limited degree of sovereignty. Such a tolerant attitude towards them was not generally shared by the several neighbouring African chiefdoms who claimed the right to use much of the land the trekkers came to occupy, and there had followed a series of often bloody confrontations as these African chiefdoms defended their rights to land which they, too, regarded as essential to their existence.

In the 1870s the largest and most powerful of these African societies remained substantially intact. Through a combination of fierce resistance (using guns, in many cases, acquired with wages earned on the diamond fields) and skilful diplomacy, African peoples such as the Basotho, the Swazi, the Zulu, the Mpondo, the Pedi, had managed to preserve the essential features of their independence: freedom from external control, and continued access to the land they occupied. Other African societies, particularly in the eastern half of the Cape Colony, had been brought under the rule of that portion of the British empire, and had come to both accept and exploit their new circumstances; many Africans, indeed, had taken advantage of the educational facilities laid on by Christian missionaries, and the economic opportunities provided by the markets of the colony, to fulfil the literacy and property qualifications of the franchise and thus to vote in its elections.

Of the Tswana-speaking Barolong people, or nation as they sometimes supposed themselves to be, it would be true to say they fell somewhere between these two extremes of independence from the white man, and adaption to his way of life. The Barolong were scattered over wide areas of what is today the northern Cape, the western Transvaal, the Orange Free State, and parts of Botswana, dependent on their cattle for their livelihood, in some places living within the colonial borders of the day, in some places beyond them. Most were attached to one of four chiefdoms. To the south lay the Seleka Barolong chiefdom of Thaba Nchu, ruled by the elderly Chief Moroka, completely surrounded by the Orange Free State but still nominally in control of its own affairs, though now occupying no more than a fraction of the land it once had. Trollope estimated its population at 6,000, and was struck more than anything else – in assessing the progress of 'civilisation' amongst the Seleka Barolong – by the sight of a 'large double bedstead with mattress' in the house of Sapena, heir to the chiefdom; he felt sure it had 'come from Mr Heal's establishment in Tottenham Court Road'.[2]

To the north lived the Tshidi branch of the Barolong, the most powerful section of the nation, and rather greater in numbers; they were ruled by the imposing figure of Chief Montshiwa, and throughout the 1870s were engaged in contesting with Boers from the Transvaal and Orange Free State for the right to occupy the area around the Molopo river, long regarded by the Barolong nation as their ancestral home. Had Trollope made his way here he would have found the greatest signs of 'civilisation' among the Christian section of the tribe, led by Montshiwa's younger brother, Molema. At that time they actually lived apart from the main body of the Tshidi Barolong, having been sent to found a defensive settlement (against the Boers) in an otherwise uninhabited spot known as 'Mafikeng', or 'place of rocks'. Chief Montshiwa, as it happened, had other reasons for dispatching them to Mafikeng, for he was finding that Christianity, while it had some very practical advantages, was also proving a disruptive influence in the affairs of the Tshidi tribe as a whole.[3]

In the large region lying in between these two main Barolong chiefdoms lay scattered, less coherent groups of people of Barolong origin – belonging to the Rapulana and Ratlou, as well as the Tshidi and Seleka branches of the nation – living on still sparsely populated land now taken over by white farmers, land companies and missionary societies. It was within this region, just inside the northern border of the Orange Free State, on land occupied by one of these missionary societies, that Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje was born.

The more immediate circumstances of Plaatje's birth are clear enough. It took place during the afternoon of Saturday, 9 October 1876, at a place called Podisetlhogo, on the farm Doornfontein, an outstation of the Berlin Mission Society's main mission at Pniel, which lay some fifty miles to the south-west.[4] Both Plaatje's parents, Johannes and Martha Plaatje, were of Barolong origin and, as their names suggest, both were Christians, and of the Lutheran faith. This latest arrival was their sixth child, all of them boys: Simon, the eldest, had been born in 1855, followed by Andrew, Samuel, Mmusi (Moses) and then Elias.[5]

After his birth, the first recorded event in Plaatje's life was his baptism, which took place a little over four months later. He was taken to be baptised not to the mission station at Pniel, but to the Society's older mission at Bethanie – a considerable journey, this, since Bethanie lay well to the south of Bloemfontein, over a hundred miles away. Johannes and Martha Plaatje had good reason, however, to make the journey, for until recently they had lived at Bethanie themselves, and had left behind numerous friends and relatives.[6] At the same time their decision to make the long journey with a four-month-old baby to enable him to undergo the sacrament of baptism suggests a degree of commitment to the Christian faith quite in keeping with what else is known of their circumstances.

The baptismal ceremony took place at Bethanie on 14 January 1877, and was performed by the senior missionary, by now well advanced in years, the Reverend Carl Wuras. Entry number 795 in the Bethanie mission register records the customary information about the event which had just occurred: the names of Plaatje's parents, and the four godparents symbolically entrusted with care for the child's future Christian upbringing; his date of birth; and the Christian name his parents had decided to give him – Solomon, or Salomo, as recorded in its German form.[7]

But as well as being Christians Plaatje's parents were also Barolong, and it was natural that they should want to give him a Tswana name too – Tshekisho, meaning 'judgement'. The choice of this name was an appropriate reminder of Solomon's biblical associations – Plaatje's mother is remembered as a keen reader of the Bible – but it also possessed a deeper significance. According to Martha Bokako, Simon Plaatje's daughter, and the source of much valuable information on the Plaatje family history, Martha Plaatje had longed for a baby girl, since all her children had so far been boys. When the new arrival turned out to be another boy, however, she was overcome with remorse for having tried to anticipate God's will. Hence she

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Kimberley 1894–8

Kimberley in the 1890s had changed almost out of recognition from the mining shanty-town that had sprung up so rapidly in the early 1870s. In the early days diamonds were sought by a multitude of individual claim holders; in the chaotic situation that resulted the scene was likened by one observer to 'an insane asylum turned loose on a beach'.[1] But by the 1890s Kimberley was very much a company town, dominated by one great corporation, De Beers Consolidated Mines Limited. Created by the logic of the business of diamond mining as much as by the driving ambition of its founder, Cecil Rhodes, De Beers had first of all bought up the small diggers, then the numerous other smaller companies who were intent on doing the same. Finally, in the late 1880s, Rhodes gained control over his greatest rivals – Jules Porge's French Company, Barney Barnato's Kimberley Central Mining Company, and, in 1889, the Griqualand West Company and the Bultfontein Consolidated Company. With consolidation came control over the selling price of diamonds, tight control and regimentation of the labour force through the newly instituted compound system, and massive profits. By the 1890s the wealth this produced supplied more than half the revenues of the Cape Colony.

These developments in the diamond industry had transformed the character of the town of Kimberley as well. Its population was now much reduced and parts of the town lay almost deserted. Fewer people were needed to work on the mines now that they were under the control of a single corporation, and many of the whites who had come to the diamond fields had been forced to leave the town and seek employment elsewhere. Most of the unskilled work was done by African migrant labourers, cheaper to employ than whites, and more ready to endure the harsh discipline of the compounds. For those whites who remained Kimberley had developed the atmosphere and trappings of a company town, its local institutions now almost as much under the control of De Beers as the mining of diamonds. The 'old roughness', as one distinguished visitor to Kimberley put it in 1894, 'has been replaced by order and comfort'.[2] It was no longer 'an adventure camp, but a town inhabited by intelligent people who read and study'; whilst its public library, in the opinion of another much-travelled observer, was 'one of the largest and best stocked that I saw in the Colonies'.[3] Certainly this was the image Kimberley's city fathers were keen to foster. All were now aware that Kimberley's wider importance had already been eclipsed

by the gold discoveries in the Transvaal. Kimberley could nevertheless claim to have seen the development of South Africa's first industrial community; by the 1890s this was displaying distinct signs of maturity.

In addition to the thousands of migrant labourers – many of them from well beyond the borders of the Cape Colony – who were housed in closed, tightly guarded compounds, Kimberley was the home of a larger and rather more permanent population of Indians, Coloureds, and Africans, the last group living in the crowded residential areas (known as locations, and numbered one to four) that had grown up around the four great mines. Mostly they earned a living by small-scale trading, or in servicing the domestic needs of the town's white population, in working for De Beers, the larger trading stores or contractors, or for the Kimberley municipality. Amongst this very mixed group of perhaps 20,000 people was a group of Africans, consisting of probably no more than several hundred, at most a thousand people, who possessed a marketable commodity of a different kind: a missionary education. 'In the townships,' noted the civil commissioner for Kimberley in 1892, 'a considerable number of educated natives are employed. They come principally from Lovedale, and belong to the Fingo or AmaXhosa tribes', and they occupied positions as clerks, messengers, teachers, police constables, interpreters, and the like.[4] These jobs were reasonably well paid, and since the 1870s their existence in Kimberley had been a powerful attraction for the products of mission schools like Lovedale, Healdtown, Morija (in Basutoland), and a handful of others, which provided Africans with the opportunity of acquiring a secondary education. As the civil commissioner pointed out, many of them were of Xhosa or Mfengu origin; that is to say, they were from the eastern Cape, the earliest and most successful field of missionary endeavour in southern Africa, and the region which produced the largest number of Africans with the best educational qualifications. Unable to find suitable employment nearer home, many had made their way to Kimberley in the 1870s and 1880s in search of jobs commensurate with their ambitions and aspirations. The Mfengu in particular, close adherents of the missionary cause, and relatively recent immigrants in any case to the eastern Cape, proved most adept at exploiting the opportunities for employment that the diamond fields provided; they more than anybody were prepared to make a permanent home in this new industrial environment.

In the eyes of Kimberley's mission-educated African community one institution in particular had a reputation for providing employment: the Kimberley Post Office. The General Manager of Telegraphs for the Cape Colony, in his annual report for 1883, explained how this had come about:

> the hand delivery [of telegrams] in several of the large towns of the Colony, but especially in Kimberley, threatened at one time to prove an insurmountable stumbling block. The circumstances were so peculiar that it became absolutely impossible to obtain 'white' labour for this purpose. Mere lads were paid at so high a rate of wages by the store-keepers that the Government could hardly enter into competition with them; but even if we had been prepared to pay any price there was a disinclination on the part of the parents in those communities to allow their children to perform so menial a service. On the other hand, a grown-up man combining the requisite qualifications of

steadiness, the power to read and write, and willing to perform the duties of a Telegraph Messenger, could not be obtained. The result was that more complaints originated from delays or non-delivery owing to the unreliable character of the staff employed for the purpose than from all other causes put together. In 1880 it occurred to me that the educated Native of the country might with advantage be employed for this purpose and during my annual tour of inspection in that year I discussed the question with Dr Stewart of Lovedale. He at once expressed his readiness to co-operate with the Department as far as possible, but at the same time impressed upon me not to be too sanguine of success. The experiment was tried. A staff of Native messengers, educated at Lovedale and selected by Dr Stewart, was sent to Kimberley in October 1880, and it affords me pleasure to be able to state that from the day on which they took up their duties up to the present, not so much as the shadow of a complaint has been urged against them, and not a single case of non-delivery or delay in delivery has been officially reported to me. The experiment so successfully tried at Kimberley has been followed at East London and King Williamstown. A beginning has been made at Port Elizabeth, and so far the same success has attended it in each case.[5]

Similar circumstances had encouraged the Cape Civil Service to take on larger numbers of mission-educated Africans in several other capacities as well. Government service, as a result, came to be a very highly regarded avenue of advancement in these circles. Most of the positions open to Africans were, it is true, at the lowest levels, but this was readily accepted since it was only recently that Africans had been allowed to occupy even these positions; and it was expected that in time, as they achieved additional qualifications and experience, further progress would be made. 'We are just emerging from barbarism,' wrote John Knox Bokwe, one of the best-known African spokesmen of the day, in 1894, 'and have to find our way, and by degrees gain their [Europeans'] confidence. By and by we shall attain, if one here and there shows capacity for positions of trust and responsibility, and creditably discharge the responsibility.'[6]

By the time Plaatje applied for his job in Kimberley white attitudes towards the employment of Africans in the Post Office had changed considerably. Whereas in Kimberley's boom-days in the late 1870s and early 1880s whites had for the most part been able to find more profitable ways of earning a living than working for the Post Office, by the late 1880s and early 1890s this was no longer the case. Kimberley was far less prosperous, unemployment amongst whites had grown, and there had developed, moreover, an intermittent campaign, led by a clergyman by the name of James Morgan, to replace African telegraph messengers and letter-carriers by whites: 'Surely with so many respectable white men and lads out of employment,' he argued, 'there should be no difficulty in procuring white labour to fill any vacancy that arises. It is the white population who contribute most largely to the revenue of the Post Office,' he continued, 'and I maintain that they deserve a recognition of their just claims in the matter.'[7]

It was fortunate for Plaatje that the Kimberley postmaster, John Henry, was not persuaded to alter his policy of employing Africans as messengers and letter-carriers. He had had good service from his African employees, they were

cheaper to employ, and they were also rather better educated than the whites he would have been likely to attract in their place: a liberal attitude towards the employment of Africans may have made him unpopular in some quarters, but it made very good financial sense. Doubtless he was also conscious of the fact that he was unlikely to find amongst the ranks of the white unemployed such loyal, capable and long-serving members of his staff as Alfred Moletsane and Nelson Lindie, both of them employed at the Kimberley Post Office when Plaatje commenced work there on the first day of March 1894. Both men had been part of the original Lovedale 'experiment' and had remained with the Kimberley Post Office ever since. Alfred Moletsane, indeed, had, by dint of what Plaatje described as 'diligence and assiduous application to duty', achieved promotion to the rank of assistant postmaster, the only African amongst the usual complement of twenty Europeans in such positions, earning – like them – a salary of £110 a year.[8]

Nelson Lindie, too, had made some progress in the local Post Office hierarchy, occupying the position, at the time Plaatje started work there, of 'sender-out', responsible for the direction and dispatch of the thirty or so messengers he had under his charge; he would have been, in all probability, Plaatje's immediate superior.

A little more is known about Nelson Lindie because an article about him appeared in the local newspaper, the *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, in March 1895. This is of interest not only for the details it contains of his background and ancestry (he claimed descent from a Xhosa royal family), but also because of what it reveals of the values and behaviour considered desirable on the part of Africans in such positions, and which were obviously necessary for survival, let alone advancement, with employers like the civil service. One essential requirement was an appropriate degree of deference to one's superiors. Thus, Lindie was 'not overbearingly proud of his genealogical tree, but on the contrary is a well-spoken, well-educated native of respectable demeanour, and is as politely mannered as a large proportion of his fellow civil servants of European origin'; he was, moreover, 'to be commended for his extremely creditable record as a private citizen and as a servant of the Government', representing in his own person 'a satisfactory solution of the native problem', and one who was in his 'usefulness and general conduct of life a complete answer to those who are strenuously opposed to native education'.[9] African employees of the Kimberley Post Office – as in other parts of the Cape Civil Service – were clearly expected to be respectable, humble, loyal, polite and do exactly what they were told.

Moletsane, Lindie, Plaatje and their colleagues were also required – in keeping with the high standards that the Cape Colony's postal and telegraphic service prided itself upon – to be efficient and well-disciplined. In return, they expected, and generally received, fair treatment. Such, at any rate, was how Plaatje remembered things some fifteen years afterwards during the course of an interview with the then Minister of Posts and Telegraphs. Protesting on this occasion about the way Africans were being (in 1911) unfairly treated by the post office authorities, Plaatje sought to emphasise his point by providing the minister with the benefit of some of his own recollections of the treatment he and his colleagues had been accustomed to in the Kimberley Post Office in the 1890s. At that time, Plaatje said, minor misdemeanours were punished by a fine of one

shilling, and were certainly not used to provide a pretext for their dismissal and replacement by whites. And if all fairness had gone, then so too had standards of efficiency; whereas, Plaatje pointed out to the minister, 'a telegram addressed "Brown, Kimberley" is [today] returned marked "insufficient address" even if "Brown" is well known', in *his* day, Plaatje said, 'when a telegram came for "Robinson, Kimberley", Robinson had to get it or the Postmaster General would know the reason why'.[10]

Discipline may have been strict, but it was fairly applied: white and black alike were subject to the same rules and regulations. For somebody brought up to the discipline of mission station life, it cannot have been too difficult to cope with.

Plaatje left few other memories of the work he did during the period of nearly five years he spent with the Kimberley Post Office. We do at least know that he started on a salary of £72 a year, and that this had risen, by the time he departed in 1898, to £96 a year;[11] that, apart from Nelson Lindie and Alfred Moletsane, his colleagues there also included Joseph Mikwalo, Aaron Nyusa, Simon Sondolo, Hendrik Molschane, David Oliphant, Anthony Makubalo and Herbert Mizine, their names reflecting in themselves a wide diversity in ethnic origin;[12] and that one of the white telegraphists who worked in the office at this time – a man called J. K. Bray – remembered it as one in which everybody was accustomed to 'working at high pressure'.[13] But at least he did not have to face up to the occupational hazards of actually delivering letters or telegrams. Shortly after Plaatje left the Post Office one of his former colleagues, Aaron Nyusa, was awarded £5 damages in the local magistrate's court after being bitten on his hand and shoulder by a dog while delivering a letter to a house in Market Road.[14] Things could be even worse in the neighbouring borough of Beaconsfield: here Theo Binase, well known to Plaatje, requested permission (which was not given) to carry a loaded revolver to protect himself whilst carrying out his duties.[15]

At some point it seems that Plaatje was promoted from the position of telegraph messenger to that of letter-carrier, which was better paid and considered to carry a greater degree of responsibility. But in retrospect Plaatje believed he benefited from his spell of employment with the Kimberley Post Office in other ways. On one occasion later in life he described it as his 'educational institution'; 'An abnormal thirst for knowledge,' he said, showed him that 'no-one was too humble or too young to teach [him] something', whilst 'a keen observation' of what he saw around him 'stood him in good stead so that he was soon able to gain a footing'.[16] There would seem little reason to doubt, therefore, Modiri Molema's contention that Plaatje responded quickly to the demands of the job and the example of the people with whom he worked, and that he acquired a reputation at work as 'a clever young man, who was quick, energetic, who knew his job well, and had good manners'.[17]

In the employment of the Kimberley Post Office Plaatje would have had to conform to the patterns of behaviour expected from so junior an employee. He and his colleagues were expected to know their place, and not to defy the accepted conventions that prevailed in the workplace between black and white. If they failed to do so they not only put their own jobs at risk but also played

directly into the hands of those who were opposed to them being allowed to do these jobs anyway – those who believed they formed part of the so-called 'native problem'. But much of Plaatje's time during these years in Kimberley was spent outside his place of work, in the company of friends of his own colour and class, and here attitudes and circumstances were very different. As soon as Plaatje arrived in Kimberley he was drawn into a natural association and friendship with the individuals who made up the town's mission-educated African community, and in time he came to play an increasingly prominent part in the network of social, religious, sporting and political activities which helped give them so distinct an identity. They were in many ways a remarkable group of men and women, and they provided Plaatje with a lively and talented group of friends. Occupying positions as interpreters, clerks, messengers, teachers, and the like, they had created for themselves a communal life which had already achieved – well before Plaatje first came to live in Kimberley – an impressive degree of maturity, sophistication and vitality.

Some members of this community had been there since the earliest days of the diamond fields. John Kosane, for example, a Wesleyan lay-preacher of Mfengu descent, and one-time ox-waggon driver, now a cab-owner, took a special pride in his claim to have been the earliest African resident of the diamond fields, having arrived on the very same day the first diamond was discovered at Bultfontein.[18] The Reverend Gwayi Tyamzashe, a Congregational clergyman, remembered by Plaatje as 'the first ordained black minister I ever saw', was another who had been there since the early days, and for several years, up until his death in 1896, he was a close neighbour of Plaatje's.[19] As a clergyman, he enjoyed an elevated status in the eyes of his community, and along with Kimberley's other African clergyman, the Reverend Jonathan Jabavu, a Wesleyan minister who lived in Greenpoint, he was invariably asked to become president, chairman or honorary member of the many societies and clubs which flourished in the life of this community. The two men assumed, indeed, a natural role as spokesmen for the community as a whole when representations needed to be made to the white authorities over some issue that affected their interests.

Then there were the court interpreters, also very highly thought of in this community. Amongst the longest established of these was Joseph Singapy Moss, a man of Mfengu origin who had first come to the diamond fields in 1879 to take up the position of interpreter in the Beaconsfield magistrate's court, achieved promotion to the Griqualand West High Court three years later, and was now a well-known public figure and a substantial property owner; George Polisa, a resident of No. 4 Location, who started work at the Post Office in Beaconsfield in 1885 before moving on to better things in the Kimberley magistrate's court; and Jonas Msikinya, educated at Lovedale, interpreter and office messenger at the Beaconsfield magistrate's court since 1879, and a member, too, of a prominent local family.[20]

Like the smaller mission-educated communities in other parts of the Colony, Kimberley's African community was bound together by a body of shared beliefs, values and assumptions as well as the close personal ties of friendship, marriage and an often hectic social life. Its members, almost by definition, were committed Christians and regular churchgoers, firm believers in the idea of progress, in the virtues of education, hard work and individual achievement, and

they had a warm admiration for the institutions of the Cape Colony and the British empire. Two such institutions in particular they always singled out for special praise: the notion of equality before the law, regardless of racial or any other distinctions; and the non-racial Cape franchise, the right to vote, enshrined in the laws of the colony, and open to any male citizen who possessed property worth £75, or an income of £50 a year, and who could fill in a registration form in either English or Dutch.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the significance of these two constitutional facts in the perceptions of this community: they provided the encouragement to strive towards proving themselves worthy of entitlement to the privileges of 'civilised life' and the means of making a place for themselves in a society which otherwise threw up so many barriers and obstacles; they gave substance to a vision, almost, which sustained them in the face of the discrimination and insults often encountered in daily life – the vision of a common, non-racial society in which merit and hard work, and not race, would determine their position within it. Often this vision was expressed in symbolic terms, above all through expressions of loyalty to the figure of Queen Victoria; her name, and the image of the great white queen, were inextricably associated with notions of justice, progress, and opportunities for education and advancement. For this reason, the African community on the diamond fields believed they had special cause to join in the celebrations for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in June 1897, and this provided one of those occasions when many of these often unspoken assumptions and associations were made very explicit.[21]

To a greater or lesser degree the members of this community, like their compatriots elsewhere in the Cape Colony, also believed they had a special role and duty in the leadership of their people as a whole. Whilst they were keen as individuals to prove themselves entitled to full citizenship and equal treatment in the life of the colony, their personal ambitions were tempered by an often deeply felt sense of responsibility towards their own societies as well, towards the people they had left behind, as it were, and whose interests they claimed to serve and to represent. For some it appeared as a contradictory and at times a confusing responsibility. On the one hand they were faced with constant pressures to reject and disown many of the features of their own societies in order to 'prove' their worthiness of entitlement to equal treatment with whites. On the other, there was sometimes widespread suspicion of them on the part of their less well-educated countrymen for appearing to do precisely this; it was not always easy to find the right course to steer, socially or psychologically.

But amongst Kimberley's African community in the 1890s there were very few hints of tensions of this kind. The impression rather is one of great optimism and self-confidence. Both locally and nationally there still seemed good reason to be hopeful about the future direction of the Cape's political affairs and the role they seemed likely to be able to play in them. And Kimberley itself was so much of a self-contained society, situated far away from the rural societies from which most of its mission-educated community originally came, that the kind of social divisions that arose between town and country in the eastern Cape simply did not emerge.

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moreover, since it was upon these interpreters that depended the proper functioning of the judicial system, and hence the means of providing Africans with access to one of the institutions they valued so highly: the courts of law. To the African court interpreters, in the eyes of their community, fell the task of making a practical reality of the Cape judiciary's claims to give equal treatment to every individual, black or white, in the courts of law. When this interpreting was done, as in Bud-M'belle's case, in the High Court, as opposed to the magistrate's courts, this burden of responsibility was all the greater. Nobody had any doubt that he was up to the task.

Probably it was through Isaiah Bud-M'belle that Plaatje first became involved in the activities of the network of clubs and societies around which the social life of Kimberley's African community revolved. Of these, none was more characteristic of their ideals and aspirations than an organisation known as the South Africans Improvement Society, formed in June 1895, and during the few years of its existence it came to play an important part in Plaatje's life. The society's name is revealing in itself: 'improvement', like 'progress', was regarded as a key concept in these circles, whilst the decision on the part of the twenty members who attended the society's inaugural meeting to call themselves 'South African', rather than 'Native' or 'African', seemed to emphasise an aspiration towards an identity in which nationality rather than race was the defining factor. The society's objects, in the mind at least of its first secretary, Simon Mokuena, interpreter in the Beaconsfield magistrate's court, whom Plaatje remembered as 'perhaps the greatest linguist and orator I ever knew', were equally explicit:

> firstly, to cultivate the use of the English language, which is foreign to Africans.
> secondly, to help each other by fair and reasonable criticisms in readings, recitations, English compositions, etc. etc.[26]

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance that mission-educated Africans in the Cape Colony in the late nineteenth century attached to a command of the English language, and there was nothing unique in the South Africans Improvement Society's view of the matter. Just a few months later the same point was made in the columns of *Imvo Zabantsundu*, the English/Xhosa weekly:

> The key of knowledge is the English language. Without such a mastery of it as will give the scholar a taste for reading, the great English literature is a sealed book, and he remains one of the uneducated, living in the miserably small world of Boer ideals, or those of the untaught Natives. But besides, in this country where the English are the rulers, the merchants, and the influential men, he can never obtain a position in life of any importance without a command of English.[27]

The point could not have been made more clearly: without good English, employment, 'improvement' and 'progress' would all be impossible. The members of Kimberley's South Africans Improvement Society had every reason, therefore, to take their self-declared objectives very seriously indeed, and Plaatje

probably owed a great deal to the society's members and its meetings (they met every second Tuesday at 7.30 p.m. in a room hired from a white organisation) in improving his command over a language in which he was to attain such fluency and power of expression. Certainly he seems to have been one of the regular attenders and participants in the early meetings of the society. He did not, however, contribute a paper or reading at the first meeting; this was taken up with a talk by Isaiah Bud-M'belle, entitled 'My ideas of a debating society', and was followed by the election of office-bearers. But at the society's second meeting, held on 16 July 1895, the secretary reported that Plaatje read out a chapter from *John Bull and Co.*, by Max O'Rell, a recently published book written by a Frenchman (whose real name was M. Blouet), best described as a humorous celebration of the glories of the British empire. Plaatje had not been in Kimberley when Max O'Rell visited the town in 1893, but many of the older members of the South Africans Improvement Society had, and it may well have been the chapter on Kimberley that Plaatje read out. His rendering was by no means perfect: 'his style of reading and pronunciation', so Simon Mokuena thought, 'was fairly criticised', whilst 'the mistakes corrected did not only benefit the reader, but also the other members'.[28]

Such was Plaatje's literary debut. If, on the evidence of the above, it can be considered no more than a modest success, the other members present would probably have been prepared to make some allowance for the fact that he had grown up on a German-run mission station, and not an English one as most of them had done; and that he had received no formal education beyond Standard III or IV, whereas most of them had had some secondary education at Lovedale, Healdtown, Morija or elsewhere. But at least Plaatje's text proved to be a happier choice than that chosen by the previous speaker that evening, Mr Walter Kawa. Kawa's admittedly able recitation from Milton's *Paradise Lost* was not, in Mokuena's opinion, 'highly appreciated by the majority of members, as it was too classical to be comprehended by the average native mind'. What Plaatje made of it was not recorded, but it was clear that Kawa had overstepped the limits of social and literary one-upmanship; for the secretary of the South Africans Improvement Society at least, Milton represented the point at which some doubts could be legitimately entertained as to the universality, not to say the comprehensibility, of English culture, something which they generally took for granted.

Plaatje's contribution to the society's meeting a month later was rather better received. Certainly it gave an indication of an early interest that had developed at Pniel, and which was to continue to fascinate him later in life, the essay he read on this occasion being entitled 'The History of the Bechuanas'. 'Being a Bechuana by birth,' it was recorded, with perhaps just a hint of condescension, 'he showed great mastery over his subject.'[29]

At subsequent meetings of the South Africans Improvement Society, debating and musical performances were added to its regular activities. Their proceedings are perhaps worth pursuing a little further because they brought out, very clearly, so many of the aspirations and qualities of the people with whom Plaatje was closely associated at this time; he was younger than they, and much of this must have rubbed off. This is how the motion 'Is insurance

a proper provision for life?' proposed by Isaiah Bud-M'belle, opposed by Joseph Moss, was reported:

> It was at this meeting that one could notice that there is much native talent in Kimberley, hidden in the ground and unused. Mr Moss led his side in able manner, and tried to prove that insurance is a mere speculation, and is therefore a risky investment, whilst the other leader proved that it is a poor man's savings bank and a stimulant and encourager to industry. After some heated discussion for both sides by its members, the affirmative side carried the day. In consequence of this debate, many who did not fully understand insurance made proposals to the various companies.[30]

The South Africans Improvement Society could help to familiarise its members, in other words, with the pros and cons of different aspects of what they would have regarded as 'civilised life'; it was not simply the English language with which they were concerned but many of the customs that went with it. On occasions difficulties could arise when conventions of debating procedure ran counter to personal conviction. At a meeting of the society early in 1896 the subject debated was 'Is lobola as practised at the present time justifiable ?'– Walter Kawa for, Henry Msikinya (a teacher at the local Wesleyan mission school) against. Not surprisingly, Msikinya won the debate, but to Walter Kawa must surely go the credit for maintaining a stiff upper lip in what must have been a difficult situation for him: 'It is only fair to state that Mr W. B. Kawa, after having ably led his side, publicly stated that his own personal convictions were entirely against this relic of barbarism.[31]

Perhaps the most striking feature of all about the meetings of the society – and here they reflect the characteristics and qualities of its members at large – is the blend of humour and self-confidence they displayed. These were qualities which Plaatje himself was to show so clearly in the future, but it is evident that in this respect, as in others, he owed much to their example. Their humour arose largely out of the social situation in which they found themselves. They were frequently willing to make fun not only of the 'ways of European civilisation', but of their own aspirations towards them; this situation was, after all, potentially a very rich source of humour. In Kimberley there was no better exponent of this brand of humour than one of Plaatje's friends, Patrick (or 'Pat', as he was known – his full name was Tait Dugdale Patrick) Lenkoane, a long-established resident of Kimberley, originally from Basutoland, who had at one time been in personal service with Cecil Rhodes, then worked as a gardener, but now described himself as a boarding-house keeper.[32] Plaatje remembered Lenkoane as the 'humorous black Irishman', whose jokes and funny stories constituted a genre called a 'Lenkoaniac'.[33] Everybody found him funny. Nearly eighty years after Maud Zibi had first met Lenkoane, the mere mention of his name brought on a big smile: he was, she remembered, 'very, very humorous, oh very humorous – we would all laugh when he came in the room'.[34] And Lenkoane's contributions invariably enlivened the proceedings of the South Africans Improvement Society. On one occasion it was in response to an undoubtedly weighty paper, 'Civilisation and its advantages to African races', read by the society's vice-president, W. Cowen, a West African now living in Kimberley:

> It was during the comment and criticism on this essay that the native Artemus Ward, Mr Patrick Lenkoane, said, in his inimitable and humorous manner, 'That the natives of this country have caught hold of civilisation by the tail, and not by the head, and it is therefore dangerous to them'.[35]

When Patrick Lenkoane was around, it would seem, the meetings of the Improvement Society could rarely have been a wholly serious business, and Plaatje used to exchange 'Lenkoaniacs' with friends of his several years after he had left Kimberley. That Lenkoane was found funny by his colleagues is a tribute not only to their willingness to make themselves and their situation the object of satire and humour, but a reflection of their underlying optimism and self-confidence. For Plaatje, Lenkoane, Bud-M'belle and the others, 'progress' and 'improvement' seemed assured, and the future held every promise. They could afford to laugh at themselves now and again. They were very different characteristics from those they were expected to display at their places of work: here any departure from the customary deference was likely to be considered 'cheeky' by their white colleagues or superiors.

If Plaatje owed much to the meetings of the South Africans Improvement Society and to his association with its members for forming and refining many of his ideas on a variety of subjects during these years, there seems no doubt that he also spent a great deal of time in private study on his own. 'Constant reading after office hours', he recalled later, enabled him to develop his knowledge.[36] Most of Plaatje's friends had had some form of secondary education (up to Standards VI or VII), and this must in itself have acted as a powerful stimulus to his efforts at self-improvement. So too was living in the same house as a man like Isaiah Bud-M'belle, who had demonstrated by his own example what could be achieved by this, and it is highly probable that he gave Plaatje every encouragement in the direction of qualifying himself for a career as a court interpreter as well. For by the time Plaatje left Kimberley in 1898 he could read and write in English, Dutch, Sesotho, and Setswana, and speak 'Kaffir' (Xhosa) and German – an impressive range of linguistic accomplishment by any standards.[37] Cosmopolitan Kimberley was the ideal place for such qualifications to be acquired, and to this extent Plaatje was fortunate to have had around him friends and colleagues from so wide a variety of ethnic backgrounds, from whom he could learn and practise his linguistic skills. At the same time such impressive qualifications could scarcely have been achieved without a great deal of hard work and concentrated private study on his own; hard work, though, was something Plaatje was never afraid of.

Upon one aspect of this process of self-education Plaatje did elaborate later in life. It concerned the way in which he had first become really familiar with the plays of William Shakespeare, symbol for black and white alike of all that was of value and excellence in English culture. Plaatje and his friends saw no reason why Shakespeare should not be as accessible to them as he was to their white fellow citizens, who had been taught to believe that Shakespeare was England's greatest playwright. As *Imvo* had said, a failure to acquire such a knowledge of English as

would give them access to 'the great English literature' meant 'living in the miserably small world of Boer ideals, or those of the untaught Natives'. Very probably there had been readings from Shakespeare and discussions at several meetings of the South Africans Improvement Society. For Plaatje, at any rate, there developed a particular fascination:

> I had but a vague idea of Shakespeare until about 1896 when, at the age of 18, I was attracted by the press remarks in the Kimberley paper, and went to see *Hamlet* in the Kimberley Theatre. The performance made me curious to know more about Shakespeare and his works. Intelligence in Africa is still carried from mouth to mouth by means of conversation after working hours, and, reading a number of Shakespeare's works, I always had a fresh story to tell.
>
> I first read *The Merchant of Venice*. The characters were so realistic that I was asked more than once to which of certain speculators, then operating around Kimberley, Shakespeare referred as Shylock. All this gave me an appetite for more Shakespeare, and I found that many of the current quotations used by educated natives to embellish their speeches, which I had always taken for English proverbs, were culled from Shakespeare's works.[38]

It was to become a lifelong interest. The performance of *Hamlet* to which Plaatje was referring was one of several Shakespearean performances in the Queen's Theatre, Kimberley, in October 1896, and again in December 1897, by the De Jong-Haviland Company, a touring theatrical company from England, responsible, so the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* reported, for the 'novel and somewhat daring experiment of importing Shakespeare into South Africa'.[39] Mr William Haviland, the leader of the company, told the *Advertiser*, on the occasion of his first visit to Kimberley, that he was impressed by the appeal that Shakespeare had had to European audiences in South Africa. Most of his audiences, indeed, would have been composed almost exclusively of whites but in Kimberley at least there was nothing to prevent Africans from going to the Queen's Theatre, although they were always in a very small minority and their presence there did sometimes give rise to abusive letters in the press. It can scarcely have crossed Mr Haviland's mind that the end product of the imagination he had stirred would be the first published translations of Shakespeare into any African language.

After Plaatje had been a couple of years in Kimberley it is apparent from reports in the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* (a paper which took a relatively enlightened attitude towards the doings of the local African and Coloured population) that he had become almost as active in the affairs of the African community as Bud-M'belle. Perhaps the most striking instance of this – and the growing degree of self-confidence and assurance that went with these activities – was the part he played in the 'social gathering of Africans', fully reported in the *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, which took place on 21 August 1896. The occasion was one of a number of activities which took place that week to provide a fitting send-off to Henry Msikinya and Chalmers Moss (the latter a son of Mr 'Interpreter' Moss), both of whom had secured places at Wilberforce University in the United States in order to continue their education. In view of the importance that was attached to education as a means of progress and advancement, both individual and collective, it was an achievement of which they, their parents, and the community as a whole

could be very proud, and it was decided to give them an appropriate farewell. As was customary with important social events of this kind, an organising committee was formed. Plaatje was made its secretary, and was therefore responsible for the arrangements that needed to be made to ensure that the occasion was a success.

And a success it certainly proved to be. Isaiah Bud-M'belle considered that the farewell dinner 'was really an elegant affair in the fullest sense of the word', and found himself lost for words ('in this day of loose adjectives and thoughtless exaggerations') 'to convey that anything out of the ordinary has occurred'. He did feel, though, that since the function 'was carried on in a novel manner, judging it from an African standpoint', the after-dinner proceedings deserved to be reported in some detail, and from the account he wrote afterwards it is clear that Plaatje, still several months short of his twentieth birthday, was much involved. For after Bud-M'belle had taken the chair ('in obedience to the desire of the committee of arrangements'), and letters of apology were read from the Reverends Gwayi Tyamzashe and Jonathan Jabavu regretting their inability to be present 'owing to prior arrangements', it was Plaatje who commenced proceedings with a toast first to 'The Queen and Royal Family', and then another to 'The Acting Administrator'. It must have been quite a moment for him. There then followed a variety of further toasts – to 'Africa', 'Local Black Folk' and 'Our Guests' – interspersed with musical interludes and songs, African and European, concluded, as was the custom on these occasions, with 'God Save the Queen'. It had been, Bud-M'belle wrote, 'a function long to be remembered', and he ended on a note of thanks to those who had been involved in the arrangements. 'The entire success of this gathering,' he said,

> is due to Messrs Sol T. Plaatje and E. J. Panyane who got up and prepared everything, to Mr T. J. Binase, who gave the use of his fine organ and accompanied most of the songs, and lastly, but not least, Mr Patrick Lenkoane, who superintended the waiting during the evening and seemed to be here, there and everywhere at the same time, arranging the details and looking after the introductions.[40]

Three days later Msikinya and Moss departed for Cape Town on the first stage of their journey to the USA, taking with them the good wishes and hopes of Kimberley's African community. It would be surprising if Plaatje, denied the opportunity of a secondary, let alone a university, education himself, had not harboured some feelings of envy at their good fortune. Chalmers Moss, sad to say, never returned to Kimberley. Two years later news was received from Wilberforce that he had died, 'preparing for his life work', so the Reverend David Msikinya wrote, 'the uplifting of his native land'.[41] Great things were expected from Africans with a university education.

Just a month later, in September 1896, Plaatje was again amongst those who took the initiative in another episode in the affairs of Kimberley's African community, this time involving an approach to De Beers. The company's

The Debut of the Philharmonic Society

of Kimberley, will be on

FRIDAY EVENING, MARCH 19, 1897,

IN THE

WOODLEY STREET HALL.

The Company consists of 18 trained Native Soloists, some of whom are holders of the Kimberley Exhibition (1892) medals for singing. The programme consists of Maskaru Part Songs, Selected Solos, the famous Bushmen Song, Kafir Dittie, with clicks, the Kafir Wedding Song, the Matabili War Song, and Ulo Tixo 'Mkulu (Thou Great God), as sung by the first Christian convert among the Amazoon Kafirs, whose name was Nteikana Gaba. The words and music had been traditionally handed down.

Mr Kennedy, the famous Scotch Vocalist, giving an account in his book "Kennedy at the Cape," writes as follows: . . . . . "Nteikana's *Ulo Tixo Mkulu* was a strange composition, the first Kafir hymn ever written. It has a pathos of its own. We enjoyed, above all, the characteristic *Kafir Wedding Song*."

The Rev John A Chamberers remarked in 1875 that the latter song is A 1.

The Company has been fortunate in obtaining the invaluable services of Mr Will P Thompson, who is well known in Kimberley as a first-rate Pianist.

ARTISTS.

Miss Lilian Sondlo, Soprano Soloist; Miss Sarah Funani, Miss Fanny Mashabi, Miss Sannie Williams, Sopranos; Miss Maude Nuku, Contralto Soloist; Miss Sarah Funani, Contralto; Mr. M. M. Thabakoe, Tenor Soloist; Mr. K. Mtyakazi, Mr A. Mashabe, Tenors; Mr. I. Bud-M'Belle, Baritone Soloist; Mr. Sol T. Plaatje, Baritone; Mr. H. R. Ngcayiya, Mr. R. J. Fanyana, Bass Soloists; Mr. R. Kamalo, Mr. T. J. Bloem, Mr. A. Molefane, Mr. R. Magengelele, Mr. R. M. M'Belle, Basses.

PROGRAMME.

The following will be the programme:

PART I.

1. Opening Chorus — "The Dawn of Day," Company.
2. Chorus — "Kafir Wedding Song" (Bekwe), Company.
3. Solo—"Trusting," Mr. Sol. T. Plaatje.
4. Glee—"Matabili War Song" (Budiwana), Company.
5. Chorus—"The Spring Song," Company.
6. Part Song — "Somebody Socks," Company.
7. Solo—"Africa's Tears" (Kawa), Miss Lilian Sondlo.
8. Bushmen Chorus — "Qar Qa ha Sanxba" (Budiwana), Company.
9. Chorus—"The Big Baboon" (Hyde), Company.

INTERVAL OF TEN MINUTES.

PART II.

1. Chorus—"Bells! Bells!! Bells!!!" Company.
2. Solo — "(How the Gluttons Willie's Dead," Mr. I. Bud-M'Belle
3. Chorus—"Ulo Tixo Mkulu" (Mtibana), Company.
4. Chorus—"The African Choir," Company.
5. Male Quartette—"Hark! that Solemn Music," Misses Williams, Nuku, and Messrs. Mtyakazi and Ngcayiya.
6. Solo—"Oh Honey, My Honey," Mr. M. M. Thabakoe.
7. Part Song—"Coyi Mi Moni ro," Company.
8. Chorus—"Picking on de Harp," Company.
9. Chorus—"Good Night," Company.

"GOD SAVE THE QUEEN."

Stalls 2/; Back Seats 1/6. Doors open 7.30 p.m. Commence at 8 p.m.

Tickets may be obtained at Mr. Looney's Establishment, Dutoitspan Road.

Pianist - - Mr. Will P. Thompson
Musical Director - Mr. I. Bud-M'Belle

16 Elizabeth M'belle. This portrait was probably taken several years after she and Plaatje were married by special licence in Kimberley in January 1898.

15 Notice announcing the debut of the Philharmonic Society in the Woodley St Hall, Kimberley, 19 March 1897. Plaatje was the soloist for the third item on the programme, 'Trusting'.

17 John Tengo Jabavu, editor of Imvo Zabantsundu *('African Opinion'), in 1896—the leading African politician of his day.*

'Friends of the natives'. 18 (left) Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner, husband of the novelist, Olive Schreiner. He impressed the president of the South Africans Improvement Society with his political address in Kimberley in August 1895, and later played a part in Plaatje's decision to become a journalist. 19 (right) Advocate Henry Burton: 'he acted on our behalf directly on the platform, in the press, and at the bar', so Plaatje recalled.

20 The Barolong royal homestead, Mafikeng, as it was in 1890 during the reign of Chief Montshiwa.

21 Wessels Montshiwa, son and heir of Montshiwa, and chief of the Tshidi Barolong, 1896–1903. 'Whoever can interpret for Wessels correctly ought to consider himself a professor', Plaatje wrote of one incident during the siege.

records tell the story. On 22 September, Mr William Pickering, Acting Secretary at the De Beers head office in Stockdale Street, received a letter from a very select group of African residents of Kimberley, Plaatje amongst them, who had recently formed an African branch of the YMCA. They wanted financial aid towards the construction of a meeting hall, and they had already constituted themselves into a building committee for this purpose. Their letter reminded the company of the number of Africans it had on its payroll ('Your worldwide known company has the honour of being the largest employers of native labour in this country'), and 'respectfully and humbly' put in a plea for 'financial aid towards defraying the necessary expenses connected with the building of and equipping the premises about to be erected in the Malay Camp'. 'We earnestly hope, nay believe, that our request will not be in vain,' ended the appeal, 'as this is the first and only request from the native inhabitants of the Fields to you.'[42]

At the end of the letter, carefully written out in Bud-M'belle's hand, were appended ten signatures, each with an indication in brackets afterwards of their tribal, or racial, identity: T. J. Binase ('Fingoe'), John Cowan ('West African'), R. R. M. N. Gella ('Kaffir'), T. D. P. Lenkoane ('Basuto'), I. Bud-M'belle ('Fingoe'), J. J. Makwalo ('Mpondo'), S. M. Mokuena ('Basuto'), J. M. Ngcezula ('Fingoe'), E. Panyane ('Basuto'), and lastly, Sol T. Plaatje ('Bechuana'). Their wide variety of ethnic backgrounds illustrates graphically the cosmopolitan nature of Kimberley's African community, and the signatories themselves probably hoped that this point would not be lost on De Beers; the more representative they seemed, the greater chance they were likely to have in obtaining a contribution from the company. Perhaps because he had proved himself so successful as secretary of the committee of arrangements for the farewell dinner for Moss and Msikinya the previous month, it was agreed that Plaatje should become 'Secretary *pro tem*' of the YMCA committee, and it was he who wrote a short covering letter to accompany the petition:

Kimberley
22 Sept 1896

Dear Sir,

I have the honour to inform you that I have been directed by the Building Committee of the Native YMCA to respectfully request you to submit the attached letter to the directors of your company.

I have the honour to be
Sir
Your humble servant
Sol T. Plaatje
Secretary pro tem.

Address: Sol T. Plaatje
Malay Camp
Kimberley

W. Pickering Esqre
Acting Secretary
de Beers Coy
Kimberley

It is the earliest letter of Plaatje's to have survived: although it contains one crossing-out – Plaatje had got half-way through the word 'enclosed' before deciding that 'attached' would be more appropriate – it is written in a clear, bold hand and signed with the abbreviated form of his Christian name by which he was now known to his friends.

Later the same day Plaatje evidently had some second thoughts about the letter he had just sent. How, he wondered, were De Beers to reply to his committee's request? He decided to write again:

Malay Camp
Kimberley
22 Sept 1896

Dear Sir,

When handing that letter from the Native YMCA Building Committee, I accidentally omitted to enclose the attached stamps for communication.

I therefore most humbly request that you must accept them for the said purpose.

I am, dear Sir,
Your obedient servant,
Sol T. Plaatje

The Acting Hon. Sec.
de Beers Coy
Stockdale St
Kimberley

Plaatje's concern for De Beers' postal budget was considerate, but somewhat misplaced: the company's gross profit that year amounted to over two million pounds and it could well afford to meet the cost of the six one-penny stamps enclosed in his letter. And if he thought that his last-minute intervention was likely to tip the balance in his committee's favour when it came to the directors' decision on their application, or even to bring it to their attention in case it got lost amongst the numerous other appeals for money, he was in for a disappointment: the directors' minutes note simply that the request was 'refused', and Plaatje and his friends got – as he recalled several years later – not 'a brass farthing' towards their building fund.[43] But De Beers did at least return the stamps to him, and therein perhaps lay a little lesson in the realities of life in Kimberley in the 1890s: providing De Beers with stamps with which to reply to letters was simply not done.

There was one further area of activity in which Plaatje made his mark in Kimberley during these years – music. Various forms of musical activity were popular amongst mission-educated Africans throughout the Cape Colony (it being prominent on every mission station's curriculum), but in Kimberley concerts and other musical events seem to have taken place on a more regular and

extensive basis than anywhere else. As well as specially arranged concerts held in churches, or on occasion larger venues like the Kimberley Town Hall, some form of musical performance was usual at almost every gathering of Kimberley's African community: meetings of the South Africans Improvement Society, for example, frequently included some form of musical entertainment (Henry Msikinya was particularly active here before his departure to the United States), as did the annual prize-giving ceremonies for the African cricket and rugby clubs; and there had been a mixed and varied after-dinner musical programme at the farewell function for Moss and Msikinya.

But there were also specially arranged concerts, and in these Plaatje often participated. The first such occasion for which evidence has survived was a 'Grand Vocal Concert', held in the Kimberley Town Hall on 22 July 1896, and given by the Wesleyan Native Church Choir. On the face of it it is a little surprising to find Plaatje, a Lutheran, involved in such an event, but his vocal talents were obviously in sufficient demand for strictly interpreted denominational differences to be overlooked. His participation can be seen, moreover, as a gesture on the part of Kimberley's African community against their division on denominational lines, regarded by many of them as akin to the ethnic differences that on occasion also divided them. It is likely, too, that whilst Plaatje would have attended the Lutheran church on Sundays, the far smaller Lutheran congregation was not in a position to organise such elaborate affairs as this 'Grand Vocal Concert'; the majority of Plaatje's friends belonged to the Wesleyan Church, and it was only natural that they should seek his participation for events such as these.

The 'Grand Vocal Concert' was a great success. Plaatje himself was one of the baritone soloists, and sang a piece called 'Chiming Bells'. The *Diamond Fields Advertiser* described the evening's entertainment as 'excellent', commented upon the manner in which the 'very good audience expressed its appreciation of the proceedings by frequent applause', and commended Henry Msikinya upon the 'evident results of the careful training of this choir'.[44]

One of the most striking characteristics of almost every musical event of this kind was the variety of influences – European, African and American – reflected in their programmes: in almost every one of them, Negro spirituals ('Roll, Jordan, Roll'; 'Pickin' on de Harp') jostled for place with popular contemporary European songs ('The Village Blacksmith'; 'The Gendarmes') and Xhosa compositions ('The Kaffir Wedding Song'; 'The Bushman Chorus'; 'Intlaba Nkosi'). Plaatje and his Kimberley friends considered themselves to be the inheritors of all these traditions, and explored with enthusiasm the rich cultural possibilities thus provided. The black American element was particularly strong. During the late 1880s and early 1890s several travelling American coloured troupes visited southern Africa and left a great impression upon both black and white audiences, none more so than the famous Jubilee Singers, whom Plaatje recalled having seen on the two occasions they visited Kimberley while he was there.[45] They held a peculiar fascination for black South Africans, in part because they represented an area of cultural achievement admired as much by whites as blacks, in part because they exemplified the message of educational self-help expressed in the Jubilee Singers' connection with Fisk University in the United States, for which they raised funds. In Kimberley there was a further

reason why the black American influence remained so pervasive: Will P. Thompson, one of the leading members of the troupe, and highly regarded as a 'first-rate pianist', fell out with Mr Orpheus Macadoo, leader of the Jubilee Singers, and decided to remain in Kimberley, together with several female members of the troupe, when they visited the town in July 1895. Over the next few years Thompson was much involved in the musical life of the town's African community, his 'invaluable services', so it was reported, always being in great demand.[46]

One of Thompson's enterprises in which both Plaatje and Bud-M'belle participated was a new musical society, called the Philharmonic Society, whose debut took place in the Woodley Street Hall on 19 March 1897. Its programme, so the notice in the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* announced, 'consists of modern part songs, selected solos, the famous Bushman Song, Kaffir ditties, with clicks, the Kaffir Wedding Song, and *Ulo Tixo 'Mkulu* ('Thou Great God') as sung by the first Christian converts among the AmaXhosa Kaffirs, whose name was Ntsikana Gaba'.[47] There were some familiar names among the artistes. The musical director was Isaiah Bud-M'belle, also a baritone soloist, who rendered on this occasion the highly popular 'Close the Shutters, Willie Boy's Dead'. Plaatje himself sang a piece called 'Trusting'. Amongst the bassos was the versatile T. J. Binase (also well known as a cricketer), and H. R. Ngcayiya, a future head of the Ethiopian Church of South Africa.

Plaatje was rather less involved in sport, perhaps the other most important social activity in the life of Kimberley's African community – especially rugby football and cricket.[48] The leading light here, as in so many other spheres of activity, was Isaiah Bud-M'belle, a talented cricketer and rugby player, who organised leagues in both games (with Coloured, Malay and Indian as well as African teams), and whose most enduring achievement was to persuade De Beers to present a silver trophy for the South African Colonial Rugby Football Board. Possibly it had been Bud-M'belle too, who encouraged Plaatje to become, in September 1896, joint secretary of the Eccentrics Cricket Club, one of the two African teams in Kimberley (the other was the Duke of Wellington Cricket Club, or 'Duke' as it was more familiarly known).[49] Fixtures between these two clubs were high up on the social calendar, but there is no evidence that Plaatje ever played the game himself; an upbringing on a German mission station had doubtless put paid to his chances of ever making the grade here, and – unlike Bud-M'belle – he certainly did not possess the physique of a rugby player. Plaatje stood no more than 5ft 2in tall, stocky in appearance but with thin, delicate fingers which looked more suited to a concert hall than a playing field.

Plaatje's involvement in all these activities – from the time of his hesitant debut before the scrutiny of the South Africans Improvement Society to his rather more confident performance at the Philharmonic Society's concert in July 1897 – were an inseparable part of the business of developing and refining the values, the beliefs, the personal qualities that were to sustain him in the more troubled times that lay ahead. At the same time these years which Plaatje spent in Kimberley in the 1890s were of great importance in forming many of his more

specifically political attitudes and beliefs. The views held by Plaatje and his friends were shaped by their experience and perceptions of both local and wider colonial political developments. Generally speaking they were strong supporters of the existing political institutions of the colony, and sought not so much to alter them as to secure and protect their own right to participate in them, to do all they could to ensure that they were not discriminated against on grounds of colour. In particular they attached very great importance to the Cape franchise, protested vigorously against the moves that were being made by some white politicians in the 1890s to reduce the numbers of Africans who qualified for it, and exploited to the full the political leverage that their vote gave them. They took a very keen interest, in short, in the political life of the Cape Colony.[50]

The most influential African political leader of his day by a long way was John Tengo Jabavu, brother of Kimberley's Reverend Jonathan Jabavu, and editor of the English/Xhosa weekly newspaper, *Imvo Zabantsundu*. Jabavu was of Mfengu origin and had started *Imvo*, the first African newspaper of its kind, in Kingwilliamstown in 1884, with the financial support of two sympathetic white businessmen, Richard Rose Innes and James Weir. Over the next ten years *Imvo* built up widespread influence among African readers in the colony, enjoying, as Plaatje later put it, 'a kind of monopoly in the field of native journalism'.[51] Each issue of *Imvo* carried a wide variety of news and comment in both English and Xhosa: news of local political and religious developments; information about the progress being made by blacks in the United States and West Africa, always a source of inspiration; detailed accounts written by local correspondents of the social and sporting life of mission-educated communities in the Cape and beyond; numerous articles and editorials advocating temperance, education, self-help, and improvement along the lines pursued by Kimberley's South Africans Improvement Society. Above all, *Imvo* urged Africans to become involved in the political life of the colony through the constitutional means that were open to them, arguing that Africans should be moderate and cautious in their political attitudes and demands, exploit the differences that existed between white politicians in the Cape in order to extract concessions, and place their trust in the various 'friends of the natives' who were sympathetic to their interests. 'Civilised' Africans, Jabavu also believed, had a special responsibility towards their less articulate brethren, and a duty to act as spokesmen for them and to pass on the beliefs and values which they themselves proclaimed: *Imvo*'s guiding metaphor, so its first issue announced, was the hope that it could serve as 'a rope to tow those stragglers to the desired shore'.[52]

Jabavu himself was an able and experienced politician and a skilful behind-the-scenes negotiator. Although his behaviour was shaped by the clear perception he had of the limits to the political influence he was able to exercise, he nevertheless represented a political force of considerable importance in the affairs of the Cape Colony in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and he did more than any other individual to formulate the political aspirations of a generation of mission-educated Africans. On occasions his name was even bandied about in the Cape House of Assembly. Shortly after the elections of 1894 Cecil Rhodes, Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, was accused in parliament of 'having played Tengo Jabavu' to secure the African vote in Barkly West; it was the kind of comment, widely reported in the press, which served

only to emphasise Jabavu's reputation, and the efficacy of the kind of participation in Cape political life that he advocated.[53] Had Plaatje felt the need for an African leader and spokesman with whom to identify, there is no doubt at all that Jabavu would have been the man.

Jabavu's influence was at its greatest around election time when white politicians tended to pay rather more attention than usual to their African constituents. But in Kimberley, as in the other large towns of the colony, there also developed a more continuous tradition of political activity, concerned with local as well as wider colonial issues and personalities. Here, too, great importance was attached to securing the support of 'friends of the natives'. In Kimberley, so Patrick Lenkoane was to recall, the local African community relied for assistance upon what he described as 'a saintly company', consisting of men like Advocate Richard Solomon, Advocate Henry Burton, Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner and Percy Ross Frames: 'a magnificent group', Lenkoane said, 'in whose hands the Natives of Kimberley entrusted their interests', and whose names were 'household words in native circles throughout the length and the breadth of the land'.[54]

In time, Plaatje came to be closely involved in the discussions and deputations that drew Kimberley's African community and these 'friends of the natives' together, and the sympathetic response which he and his colleagues received – and several notable successes in defence of their rights – was to have a lasting effect upon his political thinking. For two members of Patrick Lenkoane's 'saintly company' Plaatje developed a particularly warm admiration. The first was Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner, husband of the novelist Olive Schreiner, who established his credentials amongst Kimberley's African community with a famous and controversial address (later revealed to have been largely the work of his wife) on 'The Political Situation' which he delivered in the Kimberley Town Hall in August 1895.[55] In essence, his address was a fierce attack upon Cecil Rhodes and the capitalist interest he represented, and he accused him of using the Afrikaner Bond, with whom he was then in alliance, for his own purposes, and of maintaining it by 'retrogressive legislation on the Native question'. Although Cronwright-Schreiner did not actually come out with anything very concrete in the way of a more positive 'native policy', his sympathetic comments were nevertheless sufficient to earn the gratitude of, among others, the Reverend Jonathan Jabavu. 'Those of us who knew Mr Cronwright-Schreiner and therefore attended his lecture on the 20th inst.,' Jabavu wrote, 'knew a good word would be uttered against their oppression.' And he went on:

> Few as they are, we believe that men of Mr Cronwright-Schreiner's stamp will some day succeed in emancipating us from slavery caused by such oppressive measures as the Glen Grey Act, the East London and Haarhoff's Dear Bread and Cheap Brandy, and the Strop Bill. It only needs us to move and unite, and raise our voices against such unjust legislation, which aims at lowering the standard of the Queen's beneficent rule.[56]

Jabavu's sentiments would probably have been shared by the other members of the South Africans Improvement Society (of which organisation he was president) who also attended the meeting. Most of them, according to its

secretary, were in fact present and the society had to postpone its regular Tuesday evening meeting as a result. It would be very surprising if Plaatje had not been amongst them.[57]

Cronwright-Schreiner's address on 'The Political Situation' had an interesting sequel. It was scarcely to be expected that either De Beers or the *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, which the company owned, would approve of much that Cronwright-Schreiner had to say, and after deliberating for a few days the newspaper came out with a long editorial to counter his arguments.[58] Then, a few months later, De Beers arranged for a further address to be delivered in Kimberley in defence of the Rhodes–Bond alliance. The man chosen for the job was not at that time very well known, but he was somebody with whom Plaatje was to cross paths on more than one occasion later on in life: his name was Jan Christian Smuts, future Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa. Smuts put forward what he described as 'the general principles of a broader political platform as a reconciled basis for both the white peoples of the Cape Colony', and at the time his speech was acknowledged as 'the ablest and clearest exposition yet given of the principles of the Bond–Rhodes alliance'.[59] Subsequent events were to make a mockery of almost every word he spoke.

The other figure amongst Kimberley's 'friends of the natives' for whom Plaatje came to develop both admiration and friendship was Advocate Henry Burton, an able, ambitious and somewhat arrogant young South African-born lawyer who had practised in Kimberley since 1892. Burton was a popular figure in the eyes of Kimberley's African community as a whole because he supported their claims for fair and just treatment: 'he acted on our behalf directly on the platform, in the press and at the bar', so Plaatje was to recall.[60] What Plaatje and his friends particularly appreciated was Burton's willingness to accept briefs from Africans to fight test cases in the courts. This was a strategy in which they placed great faith, and they won several important victories. Most notable of them all was the case of *R. v. Mankazana* which gave them legal protection against the rigours of the pass law legislation, designed to control the movement of African labour, which were embodied in Proclamation 14 of 1872. The point at issue was whether the police were legally entitled to ask any Africans they encountered in the street to show their passes to them, or whether it was necessary for the police to have reason to believe that they had committed an offence before doing so. The African community was prompted to challenge the way in which the police – supported by the local magistrates – had been behaving, because of the growing degree of harassment they were experiencing: according to *Imvo*, prosecutions under this proclamation were 'fast becoming unbearable', particularly for 'the more advanced Natives'.[61] Then, as Plaatje explained, 'This lawless persecution of guiltless black men became so intolerable that the Natives retained Advocate Henry Burton and sought the Higher Palace of Justice.'[62] Mr S. Mankazana, a respectable member of the community (he was chairman of the Eccentrics Cricket Club), was the individual in whose name the case was to be fought.

They won their case. It was heard in the Griqualand West High Court in Kimberley in June 1898, Judge Percival Lawrence ruling that 'it was not enough for a native to have no pass' for an arrest to be made by the police. Several weeks later his ruling was upheld by Judge William Solomon. As a result, respectable,

law-abiding Africans like Mankazana, Plaatje and their colleagues no longer had to worry about harassment from the police; whilst the municipality, which had come to rely upon the flow of prison labour that resulted from arrests under the pass law proclamation to carry out the work of night-soil removal, had to employ contractors to compensate for its sudden disappearance.[63]

Plaatje regarded the outcome of the case as a famous victory, and judging from the number of occasions he referred to it later in life it made a deep impression upon him; more than any other single case it seemed to emphasise the part that the courts could play in the protection of African rights, and engaging sympathetic lawyers like Henry Burton was a strategy he was to advocate time and time again. In contrast to the generally 'anti-native' drift of legislation emanating from the Cape parliament during the 1890s (such as the bills which the Reverend Jonathan Jabavu had specified in his expression of thanks to Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner), in the law courts at least there still seemed every prospect of securing justice and redress of grievance. The case illustrated clearly the way in which an older, established tradition of Cape liberalism could on occasion be utilised to enable Africans of this class and background to resist being treated simply as units of labour, subject to what the municipal authorities considered to be the appropriate means of control. Such controls were already in effective operation in the gold-mining areas of the Transvaal, and in the Cape the pressures in this direction were growing all the time. But for the time being at least, Kimberley's African community had demonstrated that these pressures could be successfully resisted. For Plaatje, *R. v. Mankazana* provided a lesson in political and legal strategy which he did not forget.

When the case of *R. v. Mankazana* was heard in the Griqualand West High court Plaatje was nearly 22 years old and had been living in Kimberley for over four years. By now it would have been perfectly clear to the friends and relatives he had left at Pniel that their fears that he would succumb to the 'temptations of city life' had not been realised. Part of the reason for this, so Plaatje reminisced later, was that he always remained very conscious of the hopes they had placed in him. When he was asked, years later, how he, 'a country boy', had managed to keep along the straight and narrow after leaving home, he replied that his 'greatest standby' was 'consideration for the feelings, first of the missionary and his wife, and next his mother and two aunts'. He knew, he added, 'how much it would grieve them if ever he went wrong; and as they thought the world of him, he dreaded to distress them'.[64]

Plaatje's family at Pniel in any case had every opportunity of keeping a watchful eye on his progress, since he used to spend many of his weekends there. Martha Bokako was only four years old when Plaatje left Pniel to go and work in Kimberley, but she had a clear recollection of his visits back home during the few years after that. On some occasions, she remembered, her father Simon travelled the 17 miles into Kimberley on horseback to go and fetch him.[65] Plaatje probably also visited his father at Ditlarapeng – up until his death in September 1896. Earlier that year old Johannes Plaatje had lost all but four of the 150 head of cattle he then possessed, one of the many sufferers in the

great rinderpest epidemic which swept across the whole of southern Africa with such tragic consequences, for African societies especially.[66] The loss was perhaps too much for him to bear: he died, so the family prayer book records sadly, far away from his children, and he had to be buried, according to Modiri Molema, before either Solomon or Simon could make the long journey northwards.[67] Later, though, Plaatje apparently did travel to Mafeking in order to sort out his father's affairs, and sold off his sheep and other livestock, and the few head of cattle that had survived the rinderpest.[68]

By then—certainly by the following year, 1897—another person had come into Plaatje's life: Elizabeth Lilith M'belle, Isaiah Bud-M'belle's younger sister. Elizabeth was several months younger than Plaatje; she had been educated at the Lesseyton Girls' School, receiving what Plaatje later described as 'a much better schooling than he';[69] and she was at that time teaching at a mission school in Steynsburg, a small town some 200 miles south-east of Kimberley, close to her parents' home in Burghersdorp.[70] Plaatje first met Elizabeth M'belle on one of the occasions she came up to Kimberley to visit her brother.[71] As their relationship developed both must have been conscious of the difficulties likely to be encountered with their respective families: he, after all, was a Morolong, she an Mfengu, and it was unlikely that either set of parents would approve of such a liaison. Almost certainly it was this that Plaatje had in mind when, a couple of years later, he wrote of his memory of the 'long and awful nights in 1897 when my path to the union . . . was so rocky'.[72] The problem, as Plaatje was to explain, long after matters had been satisfactorily resolved, was this:

> My people resented the idea of my marrying a girl who spoke a language which, like the Hottentot language, had clicks in it; while her people likewise abominated the idea of giving their daughter in marriage to a fellow who spoke a language so imperfect as to be without any clicks.[73]

The linguistic problem was of course only part of it. Inter-tribal marriages may have been the accepted thing in the cosmopolitan African community in Kimberley, but they were certainly not in either Pniel or Burghersdorp, where Elizabeth's mother and relatives lived. They were strongly opposed to the proposed match, so Modiri Molema relates, and they insisted on burning all the letters Plaatje wrote to her.[74] Predictably, this did not prove to be an effective deterrent, and the couple were duly married by civil licence, parental disapproval notwithstanding, in Kimberley on 25 January 1898, the Reverend Davidson Msikinya (Congregational minister in Kimberley since Tyamzashe's death late in 1896) officiating at the ceremony which followed.[75] This was conducted in a style and manner thought appropriate by Kimberley's African community to the social standing of the young couple (for in the view of this community it was a manifestly suitable match), and it was—like so many of their social functions—a formal and ostentatious affair. Not all of the attention attracted by it was favourable. The following passage appeared in the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* the next day:

> Last evening a couple of 'swagger' looking natives resplendent in bell toppers, morning coats, white waistcoats, light pants, and patent leathers, with a

> number of females in holiday attire, were the centre of an admiring group in the Kimberley Railway Station. The rumour had gone forth that they were a couple of Lobengula's sons and certain of his wives, and the passengers and platform loungers were deeply interested in watching Master Lobengula making preparations for Mrs Loben's comfort for the journey, while when one of the princes of the blood royal deigned to take a long drink of water from an old lime juice bottle brought by one of the porters, excitement 'ran high'. Shortly before the train left, the police sergeant on duty at the station 'spotted' one of the 'princes' as an interpreter at a court down colony, while his companion was discovered to be a telegraph messenger. It transpired that the former had come up to the Diamond Fields for the purpose of getting married, and that the buxom dusky lady who had been put down as one of the sharers of the late Matabili monarch's joys and sorrows was in reality a daughter of the people and the bride of the 'got up regardless' interpreter.[76]

Notwithstanding the confusion on the part of the *Advertiser* as to exactly who it was that was getting married, one imagines that both Plaatje and his bride would have been vastly amused by the rumour that the bridegroom was one of Lobengula's sons. Less pleasing, though, was the tone of the report – a sharp reminder of white resentment at black social aspirations, and of the gulf that existed between the exuberant world of their own creation and the attitudes held by the majority of their white fellow countrymen: to them, the obviously well-educated, self-confident group of Africans attending Plaatje's wedding constituted an affront to their sensibilities and – as some at least would have perceived it – in the long run a threat to their livelihoods.

But for Kimberley's African community the marriage of Sol Plaatje and Elizabeth M'belle in a way gave romantic expression to many of their collective hopes and aspirations. They had always stressed the importance of achieving unity amongst themselves, of overcoming the tribal differences and resentments that sometimes stood between them: Plaatje and Elizabeth M'belle, Morolong and Mfengu, were achieving this in a particularly personal way. Family objections were in any case soon overcome. Presented with a *fait accompli*, both sets of 'erstwhile objecting relatives', as Plaatje called them, soon came to accept what had happened – a happy outcome to a romantic affair, and the beginning of what proved to be a very happy marriage.[77]

Plaatje's relationship with Elizabeth M'belle unfolded against a troubled background in the political affairs of the Cape Colony. The catalyst in these new tensions had been the abortive Jameson Raid in late December 1895 and early January 1896. In a conspiracy involving Cecil Rhodes, Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, and a number of other mining capitalists, Dr Jameson had agreed to lead an armed force into the Transvaal, their objective being to take control of Johannesburg, spark off a rebellion amongst the so-called 'uitlanders' ('foreigners'), and replace Kruger's regime with a government more sympathetic to the interests of certain of the mining companies. Despite the elaborate preparations that had been made, the raid was a fiasco: the planned rising of

'uitlanders' failed to materialise, and Dr Jameson and his men were forced to surrender ignominiously to a Boer force at Doornkop, twenty miles from Johannesburg. The abortive raid nevertheless had far-reaching consequences. In terms of the wider southern African political situation, its effect was to generate a new level of hostility on the part of the South African Republic (the Transvaal) towards the British imperial government; with every justification, President Kruger suspected Joseph Chamberlain, the British Colonial Secretary, of at least tacit support for the conspiracy. Political opinion polarised radically in the Cape Colony as well. The Rhodes–Bond alliance, so eloquently explained by Jan Smuts several weeks earlier, was destroyed almost overnight, and Rhodes himself was forced to resign as Prime Minister of the colony. A compromise coalition government was formed under the premiership of Sir Gordon Sprigg, but opinion now hardened on either side of the white racial divide. A pro-British Progressive Party was started, linked to the South African League, an organisation with branches throughout southern Africa and dedicated to upholding British supremacy in the subcontinent. On the other side, the Afrikaner Bond was now solidly anti-Rhodes and pro-Kruger and the Transvaal. The political life of the Cape Colony was transformed.

Against this background the campaign for election to the Cape House of Assembly in the middle of 1898 proved to be a bitterly fought affair. Rhodes himself re-entered the political fray as the leader, in all but name, of the Progressive Party, and much of the electioneering revolved around the question of the future shape of southern Africa as a whole, rather than the more parochial concerns that had hitherto dominated political life in the Cape. The election campaign was also notable for the greatly increased competition amongst prospective candidates for the African vote. For the first time, two opposing political parties now competed openly for African support, and the more perceptive African voters drew their own lessons from observing the way in which both Sir Gordon Sprigg, the outgoing Prime Minister, and W. P. Schreiner, his successor, campaigned personally for African votes.[78] Such developments were welcomed by John Tengo Jabavu, still the editor of *Imvo*. He was, though, no longer in so strong a position as before to take advantage of this new situation. A new newspaper, *Izwi la Bantu* ('The Voice of the People'), had been started up with Progressive support late in 1897 with the forthcoming elections very much in mind, and it succeeded in making considerable inroads into *Imvo*'s political constituency, making great capital out of the inconsistencies that Jabavu's continued attachment to individual 'friends of the natives' produced. For the essential fact about political life in the Cape was that it now had a two-party system. Jabavu's friends and supporters found themselves divided between both parties, or were 'Independents', and it made it very difficult for him to put forward a consistent political line. *Izwi*, by contrast, was fervently pro-British and pro-Progressive.

The general election of 1898 was the first one at which Plaatje – over 21 years old, literate, and with a salary of over £50 a year – was qualified to vote. In Kimberley, as elsewhere, the candidates made some gestures towards their African and Coloured constituents, but there was never any doubt that all four Progressive candidates would be returned with majorities that were anything less than overwhelming; the only opposition they encountered came from two

14 The Kimberley Town Hall and Library in the 1890s, venue of S. C. Cronwright-Schreiner's famous political address in August 1895, also the Wesleyan Native Church Choir's 'Grand Vocal Concert' (in which Plaatje participated) in July 1896.

12 Rev. Gwayi Tyamzashe, Congregational clergyman and a leading resident of Malay Camp, Kimberley. Plaatje remembered him as 'the first ordained black minister I ever saw'.

13 A group of friends: Sol Plaatje (standing, centre) and Isaiah Bud-M'belle (standing, right), with two unidentified colleagues. The photograph was probably taken in the late 1890s.

22 Silas Molema, Barolong headman and respected citizen of Mafeking. As first editor, proprietor and financier of Koranta ea Becoana *('The Bechuanas' Gazette') he made possible Plaatje's career as a journalist.*

23 Modiri Molema, elder son of Silas Molema, later a well known medical doctor and author. He is seen here at a time when he and Plaatje knew one another in Mafeking in the 1900s.

24 Charles Bell, magistrate and civil commissioner in Mafeking, whose staff Plaatje joined in 1898. Plaatje wrote that he was 'fortunate to have served my apprenticeship [as a court interpreter] under such a man'.

25 Portrait of Sol Plaatje (sitting, centre), with a group of young friends. The figure standing to Plaatje's right is Isaiah Makgothi, from Thaba Nchu, who was to join the staff of Koranta ea Becoana *and standing to his left his brother, James. Sitting, on Plaatje's right is Ebie Schieman, a nephew.*

independent candidates, and the Afrikander Bond did not bother to put up any candidates of its own.[79] Rather more interest both locally and nationally was generated by the contest for the Barkly West constituency, represented in the House of Assembly for the past seventeen years by Cecil Rhodes. Plaatje had a particular interest in the outcome of this contest not only because the constituency included the Pniel mission station, but also because the main candidate standing against Cecil Rhodes, for the Afrikaner Bond, was Advocate Henry Burton, who only several weeks previously had fought and won the pass law case in the High Court in Kimberley. Had the Bond been represented by some other candidate, Plaatje may well have felt inclined to support Cecil Rhodes and the 'British' party – certainly this was where his friend Patrick Lenkoane, a leading figure in the newly formed local Native Progressive Association, placed his loyalties.[80] But in the circumstances Plaatje's admiration for Henry Burton was uppermost in his mind, and he was the candidate he thought it right to support. This was not a view shared by the Reverend Ernst Westphal, the missionary at Pniel, who was a keen supporter of Cecil Rhodes. 'He sent me,' Plaatje recalled a couple of years later,

> a hot letter going for me for having leanings towards the Transvaal and Krugerism, simply because I sympathised with Adv. Burton during the last election; and he could not be convinced by my reasons that the young QC earned my sympathies not because he was supported by the Afrikaner Bond, but simply because he was a negrophilist and did a lot for us while I was in Kimberley.[81]

Whatever influence Westphal once had over his former pupil, Plaatje was evidently well able by now to make up his own mind on the political issues and personalities of the day.

The Barkly West election also provided a prime example of the new importance that the emergence of a two-party system had given to the African vote. Barkly West had one of the highest proportions of African voters in the colony, and the candidates went to great lengths to solicit African support. Cecil Rhodes personally addressed a number of African and Coloured meetings and deputations, and it was at one of these that he came out with his famous formula of 'equal rights for all civilised men'.[82] On the other side, Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner, seeking to secure the African vote for Henry Burton and his running-mate, resorted to rather cruder election propaganda in a bid to discredit Rhodes on the basis of his Chartered Company's treatment of Africans in Rhodesia.[83] Although in the end Rhodes and his Progressive running-mate were returned with comfortable majorities, Barkly West was one of the most fiercely contested seats in the colony, and it received intensive coverage in the press. Tengo Jabavu may now have found himself outflanked politically, but his longstanding advocacy of African participation in the Cape parliamentary system was never more strongly vindicated. For Plaatje and his friends in Kimberley the elections of 1898 would have reinforced their belief in the importance of participating in the political life of the Cape Colony in the same way that the case of *R. v. Mankazana* had reaffirmed their faith in the Cape's legal system: they had every interest, in other words, in the survival of the existing order, and they

could look forward with confidence to being able to play a gradually more influential part in the affairs of the colony.

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At the same time as the voters of the Cape Colony, black and white, contemplated the future complexion of their government and House of Assembly, Plaatje was preoccupied with a consideration of a more personal kind: his career. He had by now spent over four years delivering letters and telegrams for the Kimberley Post Office. He had made the most of his opportunities during this period, but prospects for advancement were nil. It was clear that Alfred Moletsane, the only African assistant postmaster, was going to get no further, and it seemed unlikely that any African would again be considered for such a position; the chill wind of racial discrimination was already threatening the careers of African employees in government service. But financially, too, things cannot have been too easy for Plaatje, especially now that he had a wife to support. As even the Postmaster-General was prepared to admit in his report for the previous year, 1897, 'rinderpest, drought and other causes [had] enhanced the cost of living to such an extent that those who are married on small salaries find much difficulty in living in comfort'.[84] Because of the high cost of living in the Kimberley district, all Post Office employees here were granted an increase in the special cost-of-living allowance they had always enjoyed, but those at the bottom of the salary scale would have been little better off.

In all probability Plaatje had been on the look-out for a job as a court interpreter for some time. Quite apart from the improved financial prospects that such a position held out – in the long run if not immediately – he had a keen interest in the law ('as a boy I was tremendously fascinated by the work of the Supreme Court', he once said),[85] and he had been busy qualifying himself for such a position by improving his command of both African and European languages; living in the same house as Isaiah Bud-M'belle must have provided, moreover, the ideal unofficial apprenticeship. So when he heard, probably early in August 1898, that a clerk and interpreter was required at the Mafeking magistrate's court he decided to apply. Such opportunities did not arise frequently, and this particular position had only fallen vacant because of the departure of the previous incumbent, Jan Moloke, following the belated discovery that he had once served a jail sentence for illicit diamond buying.[86] Plaatje's letter of application, preserved in the archives of the Cape Colony's Law Department, reads as follows:

Kimberley
5th August 1898

Application for a vacant situation
in the RM Office, Mafeking

Sir,
I beg to apply for a situation in the RM court as an interpreter.

I have been a teacher at the Pniel Mission Station for three years. I have also been a messenger in this office for nearly five years.

My knowledge and ability to translate and retranslate into the English, Dutch, German, Kaffir, Sesuto and Sechuana languages qualifies me for the position I am applying for.

I can only fill a position in Mafeking by being transferred from here as a resignation would forfeit all of my five years pension. Should you feel pleased to have me transferred from here to your office, I shall do my utmost best [*sic*] to discharge my duties satisfactorily.

I beg to be,
Sir,
Your obedient servant,
Sol T. Plaatje

RM
Mafeking

Address: Solomon T. Plaatje
P.O. Kimberley[87]

Charles Bell, the magistrate and civil commissioner at Mafeking, to whom Plaatje's letter was addressed, may well have known, or known of, the Plaatje family when he held the same position at Barkly West several years earlier. In reply, he first of all requested testimonials, and then, on 12 September, wrote to ask Plaatje to come to Mafeking for a couple of days to see if he measured up to the job. Plaatje found, though, that he could not very easily take all this time off work. He explained the difficulty in an apologetic, slightly anxious, letter that preceded his visit:

Post Office, Kimberley
Griqualand West
September 13th 1898

Sir,

I have received your message of yesterday's date, and am extremely sorry to inform that pressure in our Department does not permit me to be absent for more than three days, i.e. Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday; which means I will arrive at Mafeking on Thursday morning and leave again on Thursday night (day after tomorrow).

Hoping that the brevity of my visit will not inconvenience you.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient servant,
Sol T. Plaatje[88]

Bell could hardly object to such an arrangement; indeed Plaatje's apparent commitment to his current duties may well have created a favourable impression. If so, this was amply confirmed in the interview which followed. After testing Plaatje's competence in the range of languages in which he claimed to be qualified, Bell declared him to be 'fairly well educated', 'well suited for the appointment for which he applies', and recommended him for the position.[89]

Plaatje also had the advantage of a good reference from the Postmaster-General in Kimberley, who thought him 'suitable for the position of Interpreter', and added that 'he knows the native languages and is a good English scholar'.[90] Perhaps even more valuable, in Bell's mind at least, was the verbal recommendation Plaatje had obtained from the influential local figure of Silas Molema, the Barolong headman, a younger brother of Joshua Molema. In a place like Mafeking such things counted for a great deal.[91]

Plaatje, in short, had all the right qualifications for the position of interpreter in the magistrate's court in Mafeking. An offer from the Law Department duly followed, and he accepted. The transfer problem was resolved satisfactorily without harm to his pension, but in one respect there was a disappointment: despite the more responsible duties he was to be undertaking, the salary offered was no more than he had been getting at the Post Office in Kimberley, that is to say, £96 per annum. Since the cost of living in Mafeking was known to be higher even than in Kimberley, Plaatje had good reason to feel that he was being somewhat hardly done by, and he must have known that Isaiah Bud-M'belle, now his brother-in-law, was earning more than twice as much. On the other hand, it promised to be a much more interesting job, and prospects for higher earnings in the future were considerably better than they had been in the Post Office.

Plaatje intended to move to Mafeking and assume his new duties at the beginning of October 1898. In the event he did not do so until the end of the month because of illness – the first recorded instance of ill-health which was to be, in one form or another, a fairly regular occurrence over the next four years, and which was to affect him throughout his adult life. Neither Plaatje's own description of his ailment on this occasion ('a serious indisposition'), nor that entered on his doctor's certificate ('fever') give much clue as to its nature.[92] Possibly it was a bout of malaria, something which he was to suffer from a couple of years later, and it may be that this was the reason for the otherwise unexplained 61 days' leave of absence which his civil service record shows him to have taken in the middle of 1897.[93]

A rather more worrying possibility was that he had some form of epilepsy: for about a year later a sharp-eyed clerk in the Cape Law Department noticed – as a batch of papers passed through from the Civil Service Commission – that Plaatje was certified by Dr Hayes, one of the doctors in Mafeking, 'to be suffering from epilepsy'.[94] Whether or not his diagnosis was correct it is impossible to tell, and he may simply have got it wrong; there is no other evidence that Plaatje suffered from this disability either at this time or later in life, and he never subsequently applied for sick leave on these grounds. Indeed, had he done so he would have found himself in some difficulties, for in applying for his new job in Mafeking he had attached his signature to the statement that he did not suffer from 'fits or any other bodily infirmity'.[95]

Whatever the nature of the ailment Plaatje suffered from in early October 1898 it was sufficiently serious to prevent him from beginning his new job when he had hoped. By way of compensation, though, it did enable him to spend his 22nd birthday, 9 October 1898, at home with his wife, Elizabeth. She was now expecting a baby in a month or so, and they had evidently decided that it would be more sensible for her to spend the last weeks of her confinement at Pniel with

Plaatje's family, and to join him in Mafeking only after the baby was born. That they were both able and willing to contemplate such an arrangement suggests that the objections of Plaatje's family to his choice of bride were already a thing of the past. Personal contact had presumably done much to break down the barriers of prejudice that had once coloured their view of Plaatje's bride-to-be.

Collection Number: A979

Silas T MOLEMA and Solomon T PLAATJE Papers

PUBLISHER:
Publisher:- **Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand**
Location:- **Johannesburg**

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